

Middle East

A Tribute to Tribhuvanath



By: Mahakratu das

Sharing a taxi with a mixed bunch of Arabs, Syrians and Lebanese was a bit strange, mainly due to their different customs to ours. As the sun went down they would stop for evening prayer, all getting out into the sand and bowing toward Mecca and reciting their prayers. Then finding a place to wash and eat an evening meal. After a short stop we continued on our journey. I would softly sing Brahma Samhita prayers and Gaura Arati. The Arabs were very quiet and respectful, realising that these prayers were somehow spiritual.

Arriving in Beirut at night was a very strange experience, a bit eerie but a feeling of adventure having finally arrived at our destination. All the male passengers got out on arrival and two nuns got in. The driver wanted us in the front seat with him and pointed off in the distance, mumbling unintelligibly. We went off on this long winding road down through a mountain pass, where I started to notice artillery emplacements and soldiers wearing camouflage flak jackets. Every few minutes the taxi was stopped and our documents were checked by army patrols. The driver was becoming more and more perplexed, but trying to look like he was enjoying the drive. One soldier was strongly advising us to turn around and head back the way we came – because there were snipers in the area – as we had reached the furthest outpost which they considered relatively safe for us still under their protection. But the two nuns said they had to go on down the mountain just a little bit further to their chapel in a small village.

On we drove, darkness was quickly descending and the feeling in my gut was pretty tense. Finally the

nuns were dropped at their destination. The taxi driver turned and raced full throttle back up the mountain, back to where the gun emplacements were – this time the guards let us go through with a wave. We finally came back close to where we had started from. The driver heaved a great sigh of relief and thanked Allah that we had made it back in one piece. He said one word, “snipers” and shook our hands. It suddenly dawned on me that he had used us as a human shield, hoping that the snipers on the other side, the Christian Militia, wouldn’t shoot at foreigners. I was with André, from France; we just looked at each other and laughed upon realising the potential danger we had been subjected to.

We found a Syrian soldier outside a bunker, whom we asked directions to the part of town that we had to find. He agreed to take us personally and act as our bodyguard. After walking a fair distance to Ravanari’s parent’s house, which looked dark and deserted, I started to get a bit worried, when we shouted and rattled the locked front gate. After what seemed like ages had past, a



woman looked out of the window and shouted at us to go away. Meanwhile our escort started looking very quizzical and flustered, starting to fidget with his rifle, taking the safety catch off and poking me in the ribs with it. I started getting a bit annoyed at him and pushed the gun aside, which sent him into a fit of anger; all of a sudden things had gotten much worse. Fortunately for me André spoke Arabic and the guard also understood some French, to which he responded

favourably, telling us to go on our way, after getting directions from the woman as to where the other devotees could be found.

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We finally found the right house where Tribhuvanatha and some other devotees were staying with Ravanari Prabhu, our Palestinian God-brother. Tribhuvanatha laughed when he heard our story of the taxi ride and the subsequent tale, and said we should learn to be more careful, but that Krishna had protected us. We had some hot milk, fruits and bread, finally getting to sleep in the early hours of the morning. Out here there were no rigid programmes, we could improvise and adapt to the local situation.

Padma was looking at me and trying to indicate that it may not be such a good idea for me to come in. Soon I realised why; the man had a revolver in his lap and another sat behind with an AK47.

The next day Tribhuvanatha had a discussion with Ravanari Prabhu as to what we should do for preaching,

they were considering Harinama downtown. Ravanari said he would get a few of his Palestinian friends to accompany us as guards with AK47s and rifles. He asked if we could learn to use these weapons as it may become necessary for us to defend ourselves at some point. Needless to say, most of us objected and decided against arming ourselves, as it would probably send out the wrong message and attract trouble. Upon our declining his offer, he decided that some of us should stay elsewhere as his apartment was too small for such a large group. Three of us moved into a shed on the edge of the Palestinian camp. Here we cooked and sang bhajans day and night, with a constant supply of visiting Palestinian soldiers, who would come in to taste halava, puri and sweet rice prasadam, then dance until they dropped with exhaustion. It was quite amazing, all these big guys with ammunition belts across their chests and grenades hanging on their belts, jumping to the sound of either Avanas Candra, Nikhilananda or Tribhuvanatha leading these ecstatic kirtans, which had everyone in the area going wild in this small shed.

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Occasionally sirens would wail, indicating air-raids or fly-overs by Israeli jets. The Palestinians would man their anti aircraft guns, sitting grimly waiting for an attack, which

fortunately never came while we were there. Tribhuvanatha decided we should move to a safer location higher in the mountains, where we wouldn't be directly in the firing lines. The big war hadn't yet begun, but there were little skirmishes between different factions. It became normal to lie awake listening to the sound of small arms firing and occasional thump of heavier shells from the Syrian guns returning fire across the valley. Sometimes a tank would roll past on its way to some potential battle area.



We had begun going out with books, mostly door to door around businesses and residential areas. The Lebanese people were great, really nice natured and friendly. Often they would invite us into their homes for a chat, and inevitably for some food, as was their custom. One day while out with Padma and Avinas Candra, I noticed that Padma had disappeared way past our scheduled meeting time. So I ambled down to the first house he would have called to and knocked on the front door, only to be invited in by a lady. Avinas and Padma were sitting on a sofa together, facing a man. Padma was looking at me and trying to indicate that it may not be such a good idea for me to come in. Soon I realised why; the man had a revolver in his lap and another sat behind with an AK47.

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We all tried to make out that it was all perfectly normal, and made light hearted remarks, sticking to our story that we were just students of yoga, out meeting people and offering incense, cassettes and food in exchange for small donations. It turned out that this man was an officer in one of the factions who was inquisitive as to what we might be doing there, but was also checking up on our story to be sure that we were not a threat at all. Fortunately Ravanari Prabhu was quite well known and respected amongst Palestinians, so after quite a long time we managed to convince our friend that we were no threat and to allow us back to our business. One of the biggest problems we had was our lack of knowledge of Arabic; due to this lack we couldn't always communicate as well as we should have done.

Any more Tribhuvanatha stories? Please send them to
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